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A boot camp blitz for freshman legislators

Assembly training: In an era of term limits, newly elected members must quickly learn the ins and outs of state government

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(11-29) 04:00 PDT Sacramento -- Kevin De Leon doesn't officially start his job as state assemblyman until next week, but already he's been running ragged trying to put together a staff, finding a place to live near the Capitol, and training for his new post.

It's that last item that has taken up the bulk of his time in the first couple of weeks since the Democrat won the Nov. 7 election in his Los Angeles district.

"I've been going from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. nonstop," said De Leon, who is among a record 36 new lawmakers to join the 80-member Assembly when they are sworn in Monday.

In this era of term limits, high turnover in the state Legislature has become the norm, and one resulting challenge has been quickly getting the new legislators up to speed on the ins and outs of how the state government operates.

That's where the Robert M. Hertzberg Capitol Institute, a boot camp of sorts for new lawmakers, comes in. Its sole purpose is to provide training for legislators on wide-ranging topics such as ethics, putting a staff together, what button to push at their desks when they vote on a bill, and even a session for significant others to help them understand what their newly elected partners are getting themselves into for the next two years.

The institute will continue to conduct classes through the first half of next year, but the highlight of the program is a week of sessions that started right after the Nov. 7 election.

"We were celebrating our win and partying until 2 a.m. the day before, and we had to get there the next day for the training," said Jean Fuller, a Republican member-elect from Bakersfield. "It was pretty overwhelming at first, but once you get past the vocabulary, then it got easier."

Along with full-day sessions, the newly elected members were given a half-dozen large binders packed with information, including a glossary of terms that are commonly used in the Legislature, such as short committee (less than a quorum), sine die (final adjournment of a session), stop the clock (to artificially stop the time to ensure legislative business finishes by the deadline), and gut and amend (change the entire contents of a bill that has already passed a committee or house of the

Legislature).

Jared Huffman, a Democrat from San Rafael, said that while the training has been helpful, he also recognizes that it's only the first of many things that he'll have to learn about being a state Assemblyman.

"I think it's essential that we have this kind of foundation in this age of term limits, so we can be at least somewhat effective when we hit the ground running," Huffman said.

In the first week of training, other topics have included do's and don'ts of interviewing prospective staffers, ethics, and an introduction on what each policy committee does.

Some of the helpful hints include seemingly commonsense practices such as never asking prospective staffers about their contraceptive practices. In the case of ethics, legislators learned they are not allowed to receive any gift worth more than \$10 per month from a lobbyist, nor gifts worth more than \$360 a year from anyone else. But there are a few exceptions that include spouses.

"When it comes to ethics or conflicts of interest, the basic principles are not new," Huffman said. "But the devils are in the details. Obviously, the consequences are grave if you don't follow those rules."

As soon as the new members are sworn in Monday, their learning will continue. On Tuesday, new lawmakers will spend the morning learning how a bill becomes law, and in the afternoon, they will get a 3 1/2-hour session on the state's \$130 billion budget process.

At the same time, their significant others are scheduled for an all-day training session of their own. The idea is to help them understand what their partners who have just been sworn in will face for the next two years.

"It's really to inform families what the expectations are in terms of demand on the members' time, things like, 'Are you going to get a summer break or not?' Well, it depends on when the budget gets done," said Jon Waldie, chief executive officer of the committee.

A.G. Block, director of UC Center Sacramento's public affairs journalism program, said helping such a large number of brand-new lawmakers get up to speed quickly is a daunting task.

"And there aren't a lot of mentors, either," he said. "Who's a mentor today? It's someone who has been around for one term."

The bulk of the Assembly's incoming freshman class comes from local governments: 11 city council members, five county supervisors, three school board members and three water board members.

The freshman class also includes an optometrist and a farmer whose father was a former state senator.

The class as a whole seems more divergent politically with the Democrats leaning more left and Republicans leaning more right than their predecessors, said Barbara O'Connor, director of Cal State Sacramento's Institute for the Study of Politics and Media.

The newly elected members say one of the added benefits of the Capitol Institute program is that it gives members a chance to know each other, especially beyond party lines.

"Doing it in a group helps you to realize that you're part of a team, and the team is bipartisan at best," said Mark DeSaulnier, a Democrat from Martinez.

In fact, that was one of the important factors in designing the program from day one, said Robert Hertzberg, a former Assembly Rules Committee chairman who spearheaded the effort in organizing the Capitol Institute in 1998.

"The genius of this idea was that the staff (running the program) is both Democrat and Republican," he said, adding that building what he calls "bipartisan familiarity" was an important component.

And that, along with learning about how the Legislature works, was difficult to overcome for new members when they were only getting a half-day training at Cal State Sacramento before the Capitol Institute, Hertzberg said.

"I had worked on over 100 political campaigns before I came up, but I'm not ashamed to admit that there were a lot of things I didn't understand," he said. "I mean, who really knows how the floor session really works?"

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